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Disentangling the CIA and the Press

IN THE COLD WAR, the Central Intelligence Agency enlisted the press, American and foreign, as part of a broad, presidentially directed, congressionally endorsed campaign to combat Communist influence around the globe. Few questions were raised. The American press pretty much shared as well as shaped the consensus underlying national policy. It took a series of convulsions, the war in Vietnam among them, to show the American people—in a variety of ways, including the question of how to deal with internal dissenters—that it was not desirable or even necessary to undercut the basic institutions of their own society in order to protect the nation's security. It is in this new climate that The New York Times recently explored the extent of CIA use and abuse of the press, and Rep. Les Aspin's House Intelligence subcommittee held calm and useful hearings on the matter.

The CIA cannot demonstrate, of course, that its foreign media operations were essential or valuable or cost-efficient, any more than its more single-minded critics can demonstrate the opposite. We find it enough to observe that, in current conditions if not in past ones, it is intolerable for an agency of a free and open society to use its power secretly to create a false picture in another society. Nothing is wrong with trying to sway world opinion—if it's done openly, as the United States Information Agency is meant to do it. But knowingly to pump into another country's political bloodstream information that is misleading or incomplete, whether as to source or substance, cannot be condoned. Some take comfort that, for the most part, it was only foreign media that

were used or manipulated by the CIA. That is a hard position for a defender of the American system to maintain while looking a foreigner in the eye.

As for American journals and journalists, their responsibilities should now be clear. They have no reason to shy away from the CIA as a source. On the contrary, the CIA can be an excellent source, though, like every other, its offerings must be weighed for factuality and spin. But American journalists have virtually every reason to shy away from the CIA as an intelligence operator. A journalist compromises his constitutional privilege by serving the state secretly as well as the public openly. The integrity, credibility and social utility of the press are at stake.

Should the disentangling of the press and the CIA be enforced by regulation or law? The CIA has already enjoined itself from paying accredited American journalists for intelligence tasks. Some figures in journalism, as well as some legislators, would like to close the several loopholes in that policy. But we wonder if the press should be demanding or accepting official protection from CIA interference. It is undignified, and it gratuitously acknowledges dependency. News organizations and news people should be mounting their own defense by means of heightened professionalism, internal review and resolve and, if it comes to that, disclosure. In this regard, the CIA should be treated no differently from the myriad other official and private sources with which journalists routinely deal. No source should be able to buy or to fool, at least for long, a good journalist. No regulation or law can save a bad one.